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Greater attention should be paid to the consequences of a 'Brexit' for the EU and other states around the world, not just the UK

 Guardian
Comment Network


*The UK's EU membership is likely to be a key issue in the 2015 British general election campaign: a point underlined by the defection last week of the Conservative MP Douglas Carswell to UKIP. **Almut***

Möller and **Tim Oliver** write that while the issue is of obvious significance within the UK, a potential 'Brexit' is also extremely important for other states within the EU and across the world. Presenting insights from a comprehensive report on the views within 26 separate states to the UK leaving the EU, they note that the way Britain's EU debate is perceived across the world will have an important role in shaping the country's future relationship with Europe.

The defection of Douglas Carswell MP from the Conservatives to UKIP means the forthcoming Clacton by-election will once again bring to the fore debates about whether the UK should or should not stay in the

debate about the EU, will focus on what a British exit from the EU – AKA 'a Brexit' – could mean for the UK.

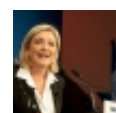
But it would not just be the UK affected by such a move. When looked at from outside the UK, a decision by the UK to stay in or leave the EU is

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not simply one about what is good or bad for the UK. Instead it becomes a question of how such a move could **change the wider politics** of the EU and Europe, and the relations non-EU countries such as the United States or Japan have with the UK and Europe.



David Cameron at European Council meeting on 30 August 2014, Crown Copyright (reproduced under Open Government Licence)

Little is known of what a Brexit could mean for the EU and other countries. For that reason since **November of last year** we have gathered and published through the DGAP's IP Journal a total of 26 national views from: sixteen EU member states – **France, Germany, Poland, Ireland, Slovenia, Austria, Romania, Bulgaria, Denmark, Sweden, Italy, Hungary, Spain, Finland, Greece** and the **Netherlands**; nine non-EU countries – **US, Canada, China, Norway, Switzerland, Australia and New Zealand** (combined view), **Japan, Singapore**, and **Brazil**; and from the EU's institutions in **Brussels**. Each was written by experts based at think tanks, research institutions and universities in each country. This week saw the publication of the compilation of these views with a foreword written by Alexander Stubb, Prime Minister of Finland and former LSE PhD student. A full copy of the report can be found on the **DGAP's website**.

Five overall themes emerge from the contributions. First, developments in the UK have not passed unnoticed, but there are varying levels of understanding as to what is driving UK behaviour as well as a great deal of uncertainty about the potential impact for the EU and the countries covered. While no country seems to be planning actively for a Brexit, many are aware that this step may become necessary because of developments in the UK's domestic debate.

Second, any awareness of the UK's position is largely framed by wider



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concerns facing the EU, especially the Eurozone. For many states, the UK is important, and the EU would be a lesser place without it. Yet while the UK's reform agenda does appeal to some states, the real pressure for reform will remain within the Eurozone. Reform agendas might happen to overlap with London's, but with the Eurozone continuing to move ahead, they might increasingly diverge. Countries within the Eurozone, the pre-in countries, and even Denmark with its opt-out have focused on Germany and France for leadership and have tried to secure a place close to Eurozone decision-making. London has become a bystander.

Third, while there is some support for the UK's positions on EU reform, conceptual clarity and language are crucial. States like the Netherlands and Germany seek better enforcement of the principle of subsidiarity, not repatriation. A multispeed EU is considered a possibility, but not – as the UK might hope – in a pick-and-choose fashion; there is less and less appetite in Brussels for “third ways” like Switzerland. And because many EU members perceive the UK's long-term EU agenda as opaque or unpredictable, they are hesitant to align with London.

Fourth, countries both inside and outside the EU are clearly concerned about the economic and, to a lesser degree, security consequences of a British exit. The UK's economic approach – especially its free-market, liberal outlook – would be the most noticeable loss. Yet some countries note a growing “mercantilist” attitude in British thinking; its economic connections to some traditionally close countries have been in decline for some time; and some states will seek to exploit economically the UK's marginalisation, using this tactic to strengthen their appeal to global investors.

The UK is not easily replaced in European foreign, security, and defence policies and the EU and Europe's place in the world would lose from a British withdrawal: France would face Germany's “culture of restraint” on external affairs, while for the United States a Brexit would further complicate transatlantic relations by stunting not only its long-sought improvements to the European arm of NATO, but also a reduction in Europe's dependence on the United States and efforts to make Europe take on a more global role. Furthermore, outside powers may seek to play on Europe's divisions, choosing between bilateral and multilateral relations when necessary.

Finally, while these economic and security concerns serve to remind

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other countries of the UK's role in the EU, they do not necessarily generate sympathy for it, but rather exasperation at the country's inability to offer leadership other than "negative leadership." The UK's debate on limiting immigration is seen as a direct attack on the fundamental right of the free movement of people and labour in the single market. EU countries fear the influence of British Eurosceptics on their own domestic debate and are frustrated with London for not successfully confronting the issue at home.

In view of previous episodes of UK-EU difficulties, the EU today is much larger and in parts much deeper. Some member states have little if any attachment to the UK. The British government's rapprochement with Germany while neglecting, and in some areas abusing, relations with former close partners in central and eastern Europe and Scandinavia means it has found itself on the side-lines of EU politics. Some of the UK's criticisms of the EU and proposals for its reform are seen as legitimate. What is not seen as legitimate is advancing these as a purely national interest and using the threat of a Brexit as leverage. London will have to work harder and engage in more effective coalition-building if it wants to succeed in shaping the ongoing debates about EU reform.

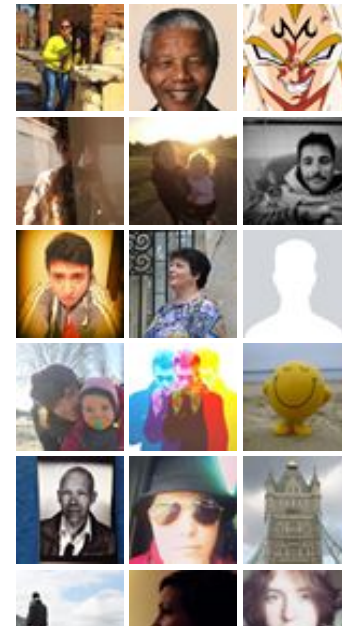
Regardless of whether Britain will ever leave the EU, this compilation shows that the way in which Britain's current EU debate is being perceived in Europe and elsewhere also shapes how the country's place in the EU will be seen in the years to come.

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Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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Almut Möller – DGAP

Almut Möller has been head of the Alfred von Oppenheim Center for European Policy Studies at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) since 2010. She is also a non-resident fellow at the American Institute for

Contemporary German Studies (AICGS) at Johns Hopkins University. A graduate of the Ludwig Maximilians University, Westfälische Wilhelms University and the Institut d'Études Politiques (Sciences-Po), she has also worked on the European Union Reform and Enlargement Program and the Euro-Mediterranean Program at Center for Applied Policy Research (CAP) at Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich.



Tim Oliver – Johns Hopkins University

Tim Oliver is a Fritz Thyssen TAPIR Fellow at the Center for Transatlantic Relations, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, Washington D.C. He has also worked at the Stiftung

Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin, the RAND Corporation in Washington D.C., the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, the House of Lords, the European Parliament, and as a PhD student at LSE taught at both LSE and as a teaching fellow at UCL.

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Joe Thorpe September 1, 2014 at 7:52 pm - [Reply](#)

Doesn't look like there would be too many tears shed if we left, quite the opposite with the look of things.

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